

**Sapper William John Beeching**  
**Regimental Number: 769842**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Railway Troops**

**born: November 1894 - died: 18 November 1918**

Sapper William John Beeching, born in November 1896 in Ramsgate, Kent<sup>1</sup>, the son of William and Sarah Beeching. His father, William, was a brickmaker, born in about 1862 in Sittingbourne, Kent. His mother, the former Sarah Hook, was born about 1872 in Whistable, Kent. William and Sarah married in 1890<sup>2</sup> and had at least three children. In addition to William, there were two older sisters: Mary Ann (born about 1892)<sup>3</sup> and Sarah Ann Hook (born about 1894).<sup>4</sup>

In 1901, the Beeching family was living with Sarah's parents (David J. and Mary A. Hook) and three of the ten Hook children<sup>5</sup> at 7 Dock Row, Northfleet, Kent.<sup>6</sup> An older son, Alfred Hook, a sailor, was not living with them at the time.

William immigrated to Canada in 1909 with his uncle, Alfred Hook, and his wife, Lavinia.<sup>7</sup> Alfred Hook had married Lavinia Cook in 1892.<sup>8</sup> In 1911, they were living at 8 Dunedin Street, Toronto, Ontario.<sup>9</sup> It was in Toronto that William enlisted in Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force on 7 January 1916. His aunt, Mrs Lavinia Hook, then living at 12 Duniden Street, was identified as his next-of-kin. William was a labourer, 5' 7", had fresh complexion, hazel eyes and dark hair and was considered fit for service in the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. He was a member of the Church of England.

William first enlisted in the 124<sup>th</sup> Battalion.<sup>10</sup> He left Halifax on the S.S. Cameronia on 7 August 1916, arriving in Liverpool on 18 August. In December he transferred to the 60<sup>th</sup> Battalion and landed in France on 6 December. He transferred to the 87<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion in March 1917. Then on 28 April, he was admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian General Hospital in Boulogne with D.A.H. [disordered action of the heart].<sup>11</sup> When he was transferred on 18 June to the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian General Hospital in Etaples he was diagnosed with "I.C.T. Rt Toe" [inflammation of the connective tissue, right toe].<sup>12</sup> He had transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Labour Battalion in July 1917 when, on 12 July, he made a will leaving all his property and effects to his aunt, Lavinia Hook.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Labour Battalion was redesignated the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Railway Troops in November 1917. The Canadian Railway Troops were support units for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In the period before the war, Canada had built more railways than any other country in the British Empire and, as a result, Canada was asked to provide railway construction men to form, initially the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps.<sup>13</sup> After the first Battle of the Somme in 1916, when the armies had become bogged down in the mud, the Allies decided to make greater use of railways for transportation and Canada was asked to provide five battalions of railway construction men to form the Canadian Railway Troops.

William was granted fourteen days of leave in December 1917.<sup>14</sup> Less than a year later he was admitted to the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station.<sup>15</sup> 12 November 1918 appeared to be a regular day for the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, with the various companies involved in general maintenance, repairs to tracks and moving camp.<sup>16</sup> However, it was not an ordinary day for William, as it was the day he was admitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> CCCS and was described as "dangerously ill." He survived for six days, but finally succumbed to influenza on 18 November. He was buried the same day in the Auberchicourt British Military Cemetery (Grave 16, Plot 1, Row B) with the chaplain, W. O'Neill

Fisher presiding. The chaplain notified his aunt in Toronto of his death. She had been receiving his pay during his service.<sup>17</sup>

Sixty-seven people (soldiers and civilians) died at the 1<sup>st</sup> CCCS in November 1918. The work of the Centre had shifted from being primarily surgical to medical, to deal with the influenza pandemic.<sup>18</sup> Influenza accounted for most deaths at the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Casualty Clearing Station after the Armistice. In spite of the horrific number of soldiers killed in World War I, the influenza pandemic, which affected the whole world and scourged Europe in 1918-1919, killed more people than the war itself.<sup>19</sup>

Auberchicourt, a village about 12 kilometres to the east of Douai, was occupied by Commonwealth troops in October 1918.<sup>20</sup> The Auberchicourt British Cemetery, which is just west of the village, was set up at the end of October and was used until February 1919 while the 6<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Casualty Clearing Stations were located nearby.

William was eligible for the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).<sup>21</sup>



W J Beeching in Auberchicourt Cemetery (Source: Author)

After the war, Alfred and Lavinia Hook continued to live in Toronto.<sup>22</sup> Lavinia died in 1932.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Service Files of the First World War, 1914-1918 – CEF," Library and Archives Canada (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>; accessed 26 March 2015) entry for William John Beeching, Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 586 – 9; "England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for William Beeching, Registration district: Milton, Inferred County: Kent, Volume: 2a, Page: 918

<sup>2</sup> "England & Wales, FreeBMD Marriage Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for William Beeching, Registration district: Strood, Inferred County: Kent, Volume: 2a, Page: 908

<sup>3</sup> "England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for Mary Ann Beeching, Registration district: Milton, Inferred County: Kent, Volume: 2a, Page: 881

<sup>4</sup> "England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for Sarah Ann H. Beeching, Registration district: Milton, Inferred County: Kent, Volume: 2a, Page: 845; "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 26 March 2015), entry for Bruno Whittle, Registration district: Blean, Registration District Number: 59, Sub-registration district: Whitstable, ED, institution, or vessel: 8, Household schedule number: 153, Piece: 4376

<sup>5</sup> "1881 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for David J. Hook, Registration district: Faversham, Sub-registration district: Faversham, ED, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 969, Folio: 115, Page Number: 13

<sup>6</sup> "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for W. J. Bucking [corrected to W. J. Beeching], Registration district: Thanet, Sub-registration district: Ramsgate, ED, institution, or vessel: 30, Piece: 829, Folio: 5, Page Number: 1, Household schedule number: 2

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- <sup>7</sup> "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 24 March 2015), entry for William Beeching, Province: Ontario, District: Toronto East, District Number: 125, Sub-District: 28 - Ward 1, Sub-District Number: 28
- <sup>8</sup> "England & Wales, FreeBMD Marriage Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 25 March 2015), entry for Alfred Hook, Registration district: Milton, Inferred County: Kent, Volume: 2a, Page: 1722a
- <sup>9</sup> "1911 Census of Canada, entry for William Beeching
- <sup>10</sup> "Service Files of the First World War, 1914-1918 - CEF," entry for William John Beeching
- <sup>11</sup> "War Syndromes: The Impact of Culture on Medically Unexplained Symptoms," Edgar Jones, Professor and Simon Wessely, Professor, *Medical History*, v.49 (1); 2005 Jan 1, PMC1088250 (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1088250/>; accessed 13 April 2015). The (generally medically unexplained) symptoms included "fatigue, weakness, sleep difficulties, headache, muscle ache and joint pain, problems with memory, attention and concentration, nausea and other gastro-intestinal symptoms, anxiety, depression, irritability, palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, sore throat and dry mouth." (p. 1)
- <sup>12</sup> "Medical abbreviation ICT," Great War Forum (<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=78766> ; accessed 13 April 2015)
- <sup>13</sup> "Canadian Railway Troops in World War I: "Lest We Forget": Canadian Rail: No. 437 November - December 1993," Fred F. Angus, Canadian Railroad Historical Association, ([http://www.exporail.org/can\\_rail/Canadian%20Rail\\_no437\\_1993.pdf](http://www.exporail.org/can_rail/Canadian%20Rail_no437_1993.pdf); accessed 16 March 2015)
- <sup>14</sup> "Service Files of the First World War, 1914-1918 - CEF," entry for William John Beeching
- <sup>15</sup> "Record of Deaths, 17 February 1916 - 10 February 1919, a record maintained at No. 1 CCCS," Library and Archives Canada, (records accessed 2013 & 2015), Record Group 9, series IIC10, volume 4556, Record number 721
- <sup>16</sup> War diaries
- "War diaries - 11th Battalion, Canadian Railway Troops," Library and Archives Canada ([http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/results/images?form=images\\_simple&lang=eng&startRecord=1&sortBy=score+desc&digitalContentInd=1&query=11th+battalion%2C+canadian+railway+troops&mediaType=](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/results/images?form=images_simple&lang=eng&startRecord=1&sortBy=score+desc&digitalContentInd=1&query=11th+battalion%2C+canadian+railway+troops&mediaType=); accessed 26 March 2015)
- <sup>17</sup> "Service Files of the First World War, 1914-1918 - CEF," entry for William John Beeching
- <sup>18</sup> "War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13-1919/03/31," *Library and Archives Canada* ([http://data4.collectionscanada.gc.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=casualty+clearing&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FINDD&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/archivianet/02015202\\_e.html&r=1&f=G](http://data4.collectionscanada.gc.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=casualty+clearing&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FINDD&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/archivianet/02015202_e.html&r=1&f=G); accessed 15 December 2014)
- <sup>19</sup> "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918," (<https://virus.stanford.edu/uda/>; accessed 3 February 2015)
- <sup>20</sup> "Auberchicourt British Cemetery," Commonwealth War Graves Commission (<http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/59509/AUBERCHICOURT%20BRITISH%20CEMETERY>; accessed 3 February 2015)
- <sup>21</sup> "Service Files of the First World War, 1914-1918 - CEF," Library and Archives Canada (<http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>; accessed 26 March 2015) entry for William John Beeching, Reference: RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 586 - 9
- <sup>22</sup> "1921 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 28 March 2015), entry for Alfred Wook, Province or Territory: Ontario, District: York East, District Number: 142, Sub-District: Toronto (City, part), Sub-District Number: 55, City, Town or Village: Toronto
- <sup>23</sup> "Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 28 March 2015), entry for Lavina Hook